

Vocation in deep waters

By [Sarah Etter](#), News Reporter

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Vocational programs are nothing new in corrections. But when they take place underwater and teach inmates a specialized skill that pretty much promises employment, many offenders line up to take the dive.



This month, the [California Prison Industry Authority](#) re-opened the Marine Technology Training Center at the California Institute for Men, where inmates learn to repair dams and specialize in underwater construction. The program was cut in 2003 when funding went dry, but California legislators and the PIA reallocated funds to resurface the MTTC.

"Historically, this program has always reduced recidivism greatly," says Matt Powers, PIA general manager. "Since the field is so specialized, these offenders are almost guaranteed jobs when they are released."

The recidivism rate for program participants is less than six percent, making it a solid investment for the PIA and the [California Department of Rehabilitation and Correction](#).

"One of our missions is to favorably affect inmates while saving CDCR money," Powers says. "We're not saving

them money with low-cost products this time, but we are saving them money with the reduced recidivism rates that we predict."

Before they get to work, offenders attend classes to learn about the physics, physiology, tool handling and blueprint reading needed to master the underwater jobs. The texts used are all approved by the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration, which certifies offenders after they complete the course.

Once classroom instruction is wrapped up, divers move on to hands-on training in a giant pool and training tank built by MTTC graduates on the CIM campus.

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An inmate learns to dive

"Inmates learn to weld above ground, and then they learn to take that skill underwater, making them a valuable asset for boat repairs," explains Powers. "They learn how the way water compression affects their welding, and they learn how to handle that properly. It's a very complex program."

Inmates don scuba suits and oxygen tanks before testing their skills. Beneath the water, they work with precision to repair damage similar to what they will face after release. Powers says this kind of labor inspires them.

"A number of people who find themselves in prison may never have had a good job on the outside. We're giving them a chance to secure reliable income before they even step outside," Powers says. "There are already job offers on the table for a number of these folks."

The program, which already has a waiting list of interested offenders, plans to train 100 inmates per year.

"The inmates are dedicated to this program," he says. "One inmate told me he felt safer on a deep dive than out on the streets. I couldn't believe what I was hearing."

Part of that feeling might come from a long legacy of MTTC success. In 1960, Leonard Greenstone, the owner of a diving construction company in Southern California, was a driving force behind establishing the program. He was also on hand to re-open the program this month, and PIA officials renamed the program in his honor.

"Leonard Greenstone is 83, and he's just as helpful as he was before," Powers adds. "He is really rolling up his sleeves and helping us to staff and equip this program. He is a very successful businessman and that's helping this program take off."

"We're not aware of any other program like this in the nation," he continues, "and Leonard [Greenstone] has helped us

resurface a successful program that we never thought we'd see again. It's a good time to be in California right now."

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